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Sputnik Research Paper

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The effects of the Soviet Launch of Sputnik on the United States

“On October 4, 1957, a mysterious beeping sound interrupted radio and television broadcasts around the world. The eerie noise sparked bewilderment and fear” (Time Trip). This “beeping sound” was the Soviet satellite, Sputnik. Sputnik was the first satellite to ever be launched into space. The satellite was an aluminum sphere 23 inches in diameter and 184 pounds. This satellite had four radio antennae and circled the Earth in an elliptical orbit. Although many may not believe it, Sputnik did a lot more than just beep. The launch of Sputnik had fueled an educational uproar throughout the United States. It also established an intense competition between the United States and the Soviet Union known as the space race. Lastly, this little aluminum ball started a social panic that swept the nation. The Soviet launch of Sputnik had numerous significant effects on the United States.

The Soviet Union success in the launch of Sputnik was a result of higher education. By training their students from the very beginning, Soviet labs were filled with highly skilled engineers and scientist ready to develop new technology. The Soviet Union’s “ten year schooling program in 1959 included twenty subjects, ranging from the Russian language to foreign studies” (Mungazi). Their students were more than prepared to explore vast regions of both mathematics and science. This led to the spark of an educational uproar in the United States. Knowing that they were behind, the United States realized that there needed to be a greater emphasis on education. The first step was “a national call for federal action in encouraging the development of key areas of research and technology to respond to Sputnik” (Mungazi). The United States needed to fuel their students with a rigorous education in both mathematics and science so that they could catch up with the Soviets. By providing more emphasis on these subject areas, the United States knew that their future scientists would be far more skilled and intelligent than ever before. This would allow the development of new technology to be easier and greater than ever before.

To ensure the production of new technology, federal government became involved in the educational boom. Their most significant action was the passing of the National Defense Education Bill. President Eisenhower pushed congress to pass the bill which states:

The severity of the nation requires the fullest development of the mental resources and technical skills of its men and women. The present emergency demands that additional and more adequate educational opportunities be made available. The defense of this nation depends upon the mastery of modern techniques developed from complex scientific principles. (US Public Law)

The Defense Education Bill makes evident that the only way to ensure the safety of the United States is to push education forward. Emphasis on education will result in workers with much higher skills that will be able to produce various technology and weaponry to defend the nation.

After the Soviet launch of Sputnik, the United States had realized that it had fallen behind in its technological progress; starting an intense competition between the two nations. The launch of Sputnik was not expected by the United States. The technology behind the satellite was so vast that the United States could not fathom how the Soviets could possibly have successfully launched it. Less than a month later, the Soviets launched their second satellite, Sputnik II. The rocket that fueled the launch had “enough to power an atomic bomb to the moon, more than enough to power a missile around the earth” (A Time of Danger). The Soviets were working fast and the United States was falling behind. However, they began their research and on November 3, 1957 they launched their first satellite. Unfortunately, the launch was unsuccessful, “the satellite rose 3 feet before falling to the ground” (Time Trip). On January 31, 1958 the United States made their second attempt at launching a satellite. The satellite, Explorer 1, was successfully launched into space.

The back and forth competition between the United States and the Soviet Union continued for quite some time. In 1958, President Eisenhower created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). NASA focused on developing space technology that would help further the research of the solar system. In 1961, the space race pressed on with President John F. Kennedy’s challenge to put astronauts on the moon. The steps to accomplish this goal began with launching men into space. On April 12, 1961, the Soviet astronaut, Yuri Gagarin, was the first man ever to be launched into space. This event was followed by the launch of the first American into space, Alan B. Shepard. The United States continued its in-depth research on space technology and on July 20, 1969 President Kennedy’s goal was met. Americans, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, were the first men to ever set foot on the moon. This life changing event brought the United States back to the top.

Now knowing that the Soviet Union has the capabilities to create deathly nuclear weapons, the United States exploded in a wide array of panic. Both Soviet satellites, Sputnik 1 and 2, contained rocket launchers greater than ever before. The rocket from Sputnik 1 was so powerful, it “could destroy New York, Chicago, or Detroit 18 minutes after the button was pushed in Moscow” (Urbanowicz). The possibility that the Soviet Union could build such nuclear missiles sent a wave of panic through the United States. The nation began by building up its military so that it would be prepared for anything. The launch of Sputnik 2 brought even more “anxiety to the American public, especially as the missile used to carry the satellite was much more powerful than anything deployed by the US military and could also be launched with a payload of nuclear weapons” (Bryant). Just the thought that the Soviet Union could be developing nuclear missiles to send to the United States made the country go into a panic frenzy. Schools across the nation installed bombing drills where at the sound of an alarm, students and teachers would stop everything they were doing and hide under their desks. The President encouraged families to build underground bomb shelters so that they could readily protect their families in case of emergency.

The United States anxiety continued during the Cuban missile crisis. The Soviet Union had placed missiles in Cuba that could easily hit the United States. So petrified that they would fire them, President Kennedy sentenced a blockade of Cuba and warned the Soviet Union that if they did not get rid of the missiles, he would use force. In the end, the Soviet Union moved the missiles; however, this event led many to believe that the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of war.

The Cuban missile crisis created such a fear of nuclear weaponry that in 1963 the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to prohibit the above ground testing of nuclear weapons. Nuclear warfare was not the only fear, both countries were direly afraid of what could happen in space. With the new ability to travel to space and land on the moon, both nations were worried that soon weapons would be used in space. This great terror brought the Outer Space Treaty. The treaty stated that there could be no weapons of mass destruction put on a space platform, a “natural body”, or placed into orbit. It also stated that no country could put a military base in space. This ensured that the study of space could be continued safely and peacefully. An important part of the treaty was that no country could claim a part of space as their own. This promised the world that every nation has the opportunity to experience and explore the solar system. The Outer Space Treaty helped calm the panic of both nations and exemplified that common ground could be found.

The launch of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik, had numerous lasting effects on the United States.

The launch evoked an educational uprising, began a competition between the two the nations known as the space race, and created social panic. Although Sputnik was just a small satellite, it had much influence on the public, and created widespread change throughout the United States.

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